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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a Christian perspective in a self-reflexive analysis of Steven Covey and his popular self-help book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." It opens by giving a brief overview of the author, describes his guiding idea of "principle-centered learning," and then discusses the book's spiritual foundations. Addressed next is an explanation of why a critique of Covey's book is important. Described here is how the critique took form and the different view points, such as that of the post-modernist critiques, that were adopted. It was initially hoped that Covey's book could be used to set up a critical framework that might adjudicate pop bestsellers that used spirituality and to explore the increasing appetite for such books' appeal among mainstream North Americans. The book's contents are described by providing answers to two questions: (1) What does Covey say?; and (2) What is the source of appeal in Stephen Covey's ideas? Critiques of Covey are examined in the next section. Some ideological positions provided here are a post-modern perspective, a feminist perspective, a perspective of critical pedagogy, a non-functionalist perspective, and a perspective of "exclusionary representation." The paper closes with 14 questions raised by this study. Contains 20 references. (RJM)

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Final Title: Who Is Steven Covey, and What Can We Learn From Critically Analyzing His Work?

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Introduction

At the church we attend in Edmonton, a men's group has recently formed to study and discuss together a book which is steadily increasing in popularity. The book in question is Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Ironically, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People may seem like an odd choice for a men's "Bible study" group, because the book is not explicitly religious in nature. More ironic is the fact that its author, Steven Covey, is a Mormon; and Mormons are group that, in our present evangelical churches, holds a recognized status probably close to the detestable Samaritans of Jesus' day.

Our men's group is not the only group in Edmonton interested in Covey's book. Recently, the Edmonton Public School Board purchased copies of this book for all of its administrators and is now running district-wide workshops for staffs to help them implement the Covey philosophy into their daily thought and work. Individuals we have recently interviewed as part of a research study on workplace learning, who work in other Edmonton organizations in both private and public sectors, have referred to Covey's book as "a solace" and "a refuge." One says, "it's my compass, it keeps me on track in what this is all for." Another explains, "I read a little every morning before I come to work: that's my thought for the whole day."

So, who is Steven Covey?

Steven Covey runs a consulting corporation, based in Utah, but with specially licensed adjunct facilitators in other North American cities. Covey, besides writing, travels from locale to locale presenting seminars to businesses, non-profit organizations, government departments, and educational institutions. His books and seminars have far-reaching effects. For example, Acumen magazine reported in December, 1994, that half of Conoco's 19 000 employees had been trained in Covey's program, and the director of personnel development estimates that Covey's business principles have saved the company $12 million dollars. "Better decisions are being made," the director states. Saturn has trained 8 400 employees, and is looking towards "saturnizing" GM by spreading the good word of Covey's principles. Other large corporations have integrated Covey's principles into their employee development programs: these corporations include Proctor and Gamble, Blue Cross & Blue Shield, Federal Express, and Shell Oil. Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People has become a powerful, increasingly influential, and widely read book. As of December, 1994, it had sold more than two million copies in twenty languages.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People promotes Covey's idea of "principle-centered learning." Covey explains that principle-centered learning is an inside-out approach constructed to deliver character education. Covey believes that our society and our educational system need a common vision, a vision in which people become empowered by developing proper habits of

living. Once empowered, people become increasingly more responsible for their own learning process[1].

Covey suggests that the actions of empowered people will energize and change the whole system in which these people live. When characteristics like integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness come through a system that models them, other people will automatically develop these traits. Covey also explains that successful people develop the ability to control their responses to the world around them by adopting a proactive stance rather than a reactive stance. Covey believes that achieving effectiveness is an incremental, sequential, improvement process. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People outlines an approach that emphasizes individual responsibility for change and promoting effectiveness.

Although Covey's book is not explicitly religious, it appears to be part of a genre -- one more in a veritable deluge of best-selling "spiritual guide books professing healing and solutions to various life problems." Other popular books addressing issues of personal development seem to have flowed in waves as one psychological or spiritual fad after another breaks into and over the public consciousness. These books essentially promise to show readers how to nurture self-actualization and continual growth and how to guarantee prosperity, happiness, and a meaningful life. Some books in this genre are enormously popular; some are strange and obscure. Why some capture public imagination and others don't is unclear. But most simply flash momentarily

[1]In regard to schooling, Covey's ideas would change education, both inside and outside of the schools. Historically, the stakeholders in the education system have put all the responsibility for improvement on students and teachers. In a principle-centered approach, however, Covey states that energy is shifted and aligned to focus on the learning environment, thereby empowering students and liberating teachers.

on the reading scene, like white water. Perhaps some create a more dramatic "rapids" because they are marketed better; but, like the others, they disappear into the Davy Jones' locker of self-help books and self-help media[2].

Spiritual guides have most recently pervaded the self-help market. In October 1994, Maclean's magazine published a cover story on "The New Spirituality: Mainstream North America Searches for Meaning in Life." The questions Maclean's asks are traditional questions of philosophy, theology, and everyday life asked by humans seeking to understand their place in the world. What is a human's purpose on earth, in a community of humanity? What meaning does life have? How best can we fulfill God's purpose? What should we do to live well the life God has intended for us?

The writers of Maclean's seem to approach their article with a basic, and we think correct, assumption. They assume that all humans hunger to make sense out of the disorder that seems apparent in their lives. They assume that all humans long for connections with other people, and wish to act in love. They assume that all humans have at least an implicit yearning and desire to walk with God, and to find God within themselves. And, finally, the believe that all people constantly search for the answers to their questions and work to reconcile life's ambiguity and difficulty. If their assumptions are correct, it is easy to see why Covey speaks to seeking people. His books and motivational seminars appear to offer a source of inspiration that is particularly useful.

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[2]Our meager attempt to write in the highly metaphorical style of the spiritual help books we are describing. Granted, Davy Jones' Locker pushes the metaphor.

Although some would debate the point, we believe that Stephen Covey can be viewed as a "Christian" educator in a very particular way. He has succeeded in creating a prescription for living based on a belief system which he claims can be found at the basis of all successful philosophies and world religions. It would be dishonest for Christian readers, like ourselves, even after close examination to deny that the belief system Covey proposes is based on a series of fundamentally Christian principles and examples, rendered in practical and attractive strategies for clarifying personal values, disciplining personal behavior and attitudes, managing interpersonal relationships, developing vision for future plans, and continually growing.

Another curiosity is that, in an age where Christian mythology suggests that secular hegemony dwarfs the cries of Christian ideals, Covey has also succeeded in marketing his system (which is explicitly God-centered) effectively to a secular world[3] in a highly influential way. Covey is explicit about the Judeo-Christian platform of his own beliefs and their deep connection to the "seven habits" he prescribes for personal change; still, he is successful in winning "converts" to his belief system from traditionally suspicious quarters within the secular world. These traditional economic "dens of iniquity" extend from the popular entertainment and business media, which refer to him as a "guru," to profit-minded corporations which administer his principles system-wide in broad implementation programs.

To be absolutely honest, when we first encountered Stephen Covey's work, it was through the stories of "converts" who had read the book and found its principles appealing. We bought the book and anxiously reviewed it,

[3]And, probably the business world is the secular of the seculars (as opposed to the holy of holies).

searching out the obvious problems we knew had to exist in it. Our self-confessed academic cynicism encouraged us to, almost as a given, first decide that any "movement" like Covey's must be theoretically shaky. We found ourselves seeking flaws in his work, asking critical questions about his motives, or -- the academic fail safe -- hoping to condemn his methods. A "seven-step" magic solution to the problems of life? Obviously either (1) a naive vision or (2) a calculated and seductive appeal to a narcissistic, hedonistic society addicted to instant gratification, despite Covey's claim (or maybe because of it) that his book rejects a quick-fix approach[4].

Something seemed inherently frightening about yoking spiritual sentiments with appeals to commercial enterprise. For us, the notion of all employees in General Motors becoming "Coveyized" carries noxious associations of regimes thriving on manipulative propaganda and cults bypassing their devotees' critical rationality through abusive, invasive techniques of emotional control. Even supposing that Covey did wish to promote Christian ethics, why would he espouse these deep spiritual changes and choose to evangelize through a multi-million dollar international consulting corporation?

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[4]Throughout the course of writing this paper, we talked a lot about Covey and his work. One of the comments we made was that Covey, unlike many of our favorite writers -- like Thomas Merton, put his money where his mouth was. We realized that it is easy to theorize about loving people, and we noted unfairly Thomas Merton's story about driving in a car in Louisville, Kentucky, looking at the people, and loving them. One thing we admired about Covey is that he doesn't stay in the car. It is easier to love people from the car than on the street, we noted, suggesting that theory differs from practice even in the act of loving. We might not agree with Covey's ways of acting, but we do appreciate the fact that he does act.

Returning to Covey's Book

We were surprised when we returned more rigorously to Covey's book to prepare for the critique in this paper, however. Although we are accustomed to reading more thorough books, books that are better documented, and books more geared for an "academic" audience, we had to admit that Covey's principles and the practical suggestions for living he gives are generally not only sound, but honestly "Christian" in nature. Still, critical questions lingered, and some aspects of his writing rankled us. However, we began to realize that our initial intent of simply tearing apart a popular guru to expose his shortcomings, particularly one that our Christian men-friends suggest is actually doing much to help people integrate Christ's teachings into their lives, did little to advance our own cause of promoting Christian living in our work as educators in a secular world.

We also realized that, in addition to forming a critique of Covey's work for this paper, our own always-necessary need for self-critique encouraged us to ask serious questions of anyone's "Christian" writings that interjected themselves into the secular world. Because we all need to expose our own actions and writings to critique, the critical questions that we ask about Covey's work are legitimate, we believe. Plus, we also soberly considered the truth that the need to be critical increases in importance when the criticism we lay on others -- in this case Covey -- rings true with our own beliefs[5]. It is true that, as Christians living and acting in the world, criticism is often directed toward us by non-Christians. Even if this were not true, the act of self-critique is more than a necessary evil. No methodologies or curricula can

[5]Something about taking the log out of our own eye.

establish havens beyond the bounds of critical questioning. It may not be popular, but critical questions are especially fruitful when they are directed towards ourselves, as practicing Christian educators.

The problems we found ourselves raising about "Coveyism" were, we realized with a bit of a shock, exactly the sorts of problems that, within our own work and philosophy, often have evaded us. We know we need to be self-reflexive about the principles animating our practice, about our motives, and about the methods through which we do our practice. But critical self-reflection is extraordinarily difficult. Some theorists write that an external crisis or other trigger is required to enable people to find the necessary distanced vantage point that truly allows them to view themselves and their assumptions in a critical light. Generating a critique of Covey, even those aspects of his philosophy and method which resonate powerfully with our own beliefs, somehow is much easier than seeing into the fog of our own blind spots.

Why a Critique of Covey is Important

We have set out to establish a critique of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People because we believe that Covey's work needs to be critically scrutinized. First, it makes powerful claims about how lives can be changed by adhering to its principles. Second, its impact is spreading throughout both secular and non-secular society. Third, a critical review of Covey's work may allow us to find insight into our own attempts to live as Christians in secular society.

In putting together our critique of Covey's work, we first read it as ourselves. Then, we imagined critically how others would read it. We followed this method for two reasons. First, we found it easier to formulate this critique by taking different roles. Second, we realized that the general topic emerging in our paper was how Christians and Christian principles are going to be critiqued in the secular society of the university. To this end, we thought it might be fruitful to peer through the lens of various critical positions we find prevalent within the university milieu.

A third reason emerged as we worked through these critical positions. The critical positioning nourished a certain creativity that we could not have anticipated. With each new critical hat we tried on, from the "structuralist feminist critic" role to the "post-modernist critic," new elements became visible. New questions surfaced. These questions became springboards for inquiry not only about Covey and other spiritual "gurus" but most startlingly about ourselves. Each perspective proved useful in unearthing new probes and illuminating new dimensions for scrutiny that helped us interrupt momentarily the seamless taken-for-grantedness of our own comfortable meaning structures.

To some, perhaps from a certain rather arrogant academic stance, the task of deconstructing a "pop," "self-helping," best-seller promoting "placebo spirituality" might be construed to be so easy or self-evident that it would not be worth the bother. To others, the act of launching a critique upon a sincere and thoughtful effort to help people towards spiritual growth might appear self-serving and gratuitously malicious in the extreme. But what we have found through this exercise is unexpectedly paradoxical. We have developed

a genuine if somewhat grudging respect for Covey's work, and acknowledge its potential when engaged voluntarily by individuals for *their own reasons* to use or discard *according to their own spiritual journeys* within the context of *their own cultural understandings*.[6]

The other side of the paradox is the not unexpected mass of gaps and problematics we located in Covey's work through our critique, unearthing some accusations which we couldn't help but rather sheepishly apply to ourselves as active Christians who are explicit and sometimes evangelistic about our faith in our own writing and teaching. In other words, Covey's book holds a mimetic quality for us that offers useful possibilities for critical self-reflection. The purpose of the critical challenges presented here is to create a series of questions to ask ourselves as Christians living and working in the secular culture of the university. Covey's work has proven to be a fruitful conceptual catalyst for this critical stance.

Unearthing Covey's Work, and Building Upon It

What follows is first a presentation of Covey's main philosophy, then a series of critiques from different perspectives. These perspectives have been chosen largely because they are familiar to us. We live and work amongst them. Our choices are also based on our belief that these perspectives can illuminate useful questions for critique. We do not endeavor to present a comprehensive critical framework for Covey's work, nor to develop a

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[6]Our reluctant endorsement does not diminish in any way our strong concerns for the way businesses mandate Covey-study or similar uni-lateral proselytizing using Covey's particular brand of spiritual ideology, especially when Covey-izing is linked to employment or other mandatory organizational membership. In other words, we feel that some corporate organizations are shoving Covey down their workers' throats.

thorough explication of each critical perspective. Our primary focus in our Covey-critiquing is self-reflexivity, not Covey-bashing.

Question #1: What does Covey say?

At the heart of Steven Covey's book are seven[7] principles which, he advocates, should form the basis for evolving what he explains to be the best behavioral patterns, or habits, for living happily and "effectively." His main thesis is stated on page 108: "People can't live with change if there's not a changeless core inside them...a sense of who you are, what you are about, and what you value."

Second to this main thesis is his assumption that healthy human beings grow and develop in specific, unchangeable ways: they move from dependence to independence, then from independence to interdependence. Covey's belief system is a unitary philosophy based on principles for living which Covey claims are the "correct" principles. By "correct" he means that all religious or cultural groups recognize these principles as unchanging and legitimate. In fact, Covey states that these principles are "lawful" in the mental realm in the same sense that the laws of the physical universe are lawful in the physical realm.

[7]This is a good Bibilical number (Revelation Chapter 3:1; Chapter 5:1 and 6; Chapters 6-8; Chapter 8:6; Chapter 11:15; Chapter 16:1; Chapter 17: 9; Chapter 21:9. It would probably be a stretch to mention Disney's Snow White relationship to Happy, Doc, Grumpy,...although feminist critique would attack the typical gender-role structures within this story.

People's behavior, attitudes and values are judged according to these principles. Covey has sublimated these principles into seven essential "habits"[8] of living, which are outlined in simple, catchy ways. These are:

1. Be proactive. *Between the "stimulus" of an experience and your "response" to that experience, you have freedom to choose. You can be "response-able." And, you must take the initiative to act or you will "be acted upon."*

2. Begin with the end in mind. *Be clear and careful when creating your goals. Center these goals on correct principles, which you should develop through a personal mission statement.*

3. Put first things first. *Manage your time and schedule your priorities. Through the exercise of your independent will, you should work to become principle-centered.*

4. Think win-win. *Seek mutual benefit in all interactions.*

5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. *Use empathic listening and "diagnose before you prescribe."*

6. Synergize. *Catalyze, unify, and unleash the greatest powers within people by respecting differences and building on strengths.*

7. Sharpen the saw. *Continue to renew the four dimensions of your nature: physical, social/emotional, mental, spiritual.*

Covey declares the "Laws of Life" to be cooperation, contribution, self-discipline, and integrity (p.199). Relationships should build courtesy, kindness, honesty, acceptance of the other, and focus on keeping commitments.

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[8]"Habit" is defined as "the intersection of knowledge, skill, and desire" (Covey, 1989, p. 47).

Question #2: What is the source of appeal in Stephen Covey's ideas?

We believe the answer to the question: Why is Covey so popular? lies in the fact that, like other sources of pop spiritualism marketed through best-selling books like The Celestine Prophecy, Covey offers a stable, coherent picture of a world that offers unlimited possibilities for us all. The task is that people must wake up to their power to choose these opportunities. We believe that Covey's message tends to appeal to at least two "kinds" of people: (1) those who feel that they are being treated badly by the world or people and (2) those who tend to feel guilty, either about not living up to their potential or not taking advantage of their advantages. People who are seeking a foothold in a whirling universe -- and that might include all of us to some extent -- find this directive rule-centered system appealing because it tells us exactly what to do in a step-wise fashion. Living can be mastered after all, Covey tells us. The mysteries of suffering and the complexities and disappointments of human behavior can be figured out and managed "effectively."

Covey's book suggests that problems can be solved, albeit with some struggle; all the events and things of one's life have meaning; and each of us personally can exercise power to effectively shape a better world for ourselves. As humans, we are not alienated but intricately linked to one another in a latent synergy of community that just waits for us to participate and energize it. Such a picture is naturally irresistible to those of us feeling anxious and afraid in a post-modern world, feeling our worlds to be fragmented, our families threatened by hostility and tension, our workplaces torn by competition and scarcity, our lives increasingly destabilized by urgency and stress, and our sense of competency and control undermined. The real

popularity of Covey's book lies in the fact that Covey has tapped a genuine problem -- only the most insensitive of us would feel that the world we know is any different than the world he wants to help us fix.

The distinguished literary critic Kenneth Burke once noted that the first step in persuasion is identification. If Burke's statement is true, then Covey has identified well with the majority of people. His book not only validates many of our own anxieties as post-modern humans, but outlines our salvation by providing practical steps for action that are manageable and that feel right -- at least they don't feel blatantly weird[9].

Our use of the term salvation in the previous paragraph might seem a bit overstated; however, Covey has before outlined his own missionary principles of converting and persuading people in his previous book titled Spiritual Root of Human Relations (written in 1973). Covey's stance towards the reader also involves a relationship of status. For example, he exhorts the reader to read as if being taught. This stance encourages the reader to remain open, vulnerable, and to willingly suspend "disbelief." In other words, the reader is encouraged to exorcise, not exercise, critical capacity and accept the "teachings" that Covey explicates. Covey then goes on, in expository fashion, to outline the "correct" principles and natural laws that govern his work, and to claim that God is the source of these laws (p. 319). Covey also shows these

[9]There seems to be a mythology among evangelicals that society is anti-Christian. However, the research does not support this view. Michael Medved's book Hollywood vs. America (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, page 4) notes a 1990 Parents magazine poll which showed that 72% of the sample felt that there should be strict prohibitions against "ridiculing or making fun of religion" on television. In the same sample, 64% of the people backed restrictions "ridiculing or making fun of traditional values, such as marriage and motherhood." Our point is that, for a majority of North American society, traditional values and religion have not fallen out of favor.

laws are in harmony with the natural laws for growth (p. 52, note "LAWS") and to outline the inevitability of these laws on human life.

Covey's book's popularity may, in fact, stem from the fact that Covey really is echoing "the Truth, the Way, the Life" and that his readers naturally find resonance inside the deepest part of their own consciences and souls with what he says. He does claim that the principles he espouses are part of deep rhythms and patterns that have driven all of life since the beginning of time; that they are part of all successful world religions and philosophies; and, that they are sound because they derive from the natural laws that have their source in God. Because God is also the source of human conscience, we naturally gravitate towards His laws.

Critiques of Covey

There are a number of possible critiques of Covey's work. Below, we have outlined five of them. These include (1) a post-modern critique, (2) a feminist critique (one that loosely combines elements from different feminist perspectives), (3) a critique based on critical pedagogy, (4) a critique that opposes Covey's instrumentalist world-shaping view, which we call non-functionalist, and (5) a perspective we have called a critique of "exclusionary representation." As noted before, these critiques have been chosen because they represent critical thought that we have been exposed to within the university circumstance; and, we understand that, like Covey, Christians working within the secular circumstance of the university will be confronted with challenges from these same, or similar, scholarly critiques. Consequently, we feel they are worth considering.

Critical Challenges to Covey from a Post-modernist Perspective[10]

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the diversity and discrepancies among all the positions expressed by a growing range of philosophers, linguists, literary and art critics, and cultural theorists that are sometime or other labeled as "post-modernist."[11] We have simply culled five arguments that derive from a post-modern position. These five are not intended to provide a definitive summary of a post-modernist perspective, but to provide the beginnings of what a post-modern critique might look like as it is applied to Covey's work. They were chosen for their usefulness in illuminating broader questions, through their critical challenge to Covey, for ourselves.

Assertions of post-modernism

Post-modernism Critical Point #1: Metanarratives or unitary belief systems must be "interrupted" and deconstructed, because unity, coherence, order are illusions.

Post-modern writers are suspicious of anyone or anything presuming to present a one-best-theory, a single, universally-applicable narrative to explain experience. These are called "metanarratives" or "grand narratives." These metanarratives might include the "canon" of high culture, or formal theories, or political or religious doctrines, or Alan Bloom's the 100 best books we should all know, etc.

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[10]Because we believe that the post-modern position is an important challenge to Christian thought and may be new to some, we have taken the liberty to develop it in greater detail than the other critiques.

[11]See instead resources such as Pauline Rosenau's (1992) Postmodernism and the Social Sciences (Princeton: Princeton University Press) or Bryan Turner's (1990) edited Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity (Newbury Park: Sage).

Post-modernism Critical Point #2. Modernist representations of the world tend to force homogeneity. We should resist forces compelling homogeneity and celebrate heterogeneity.

Post-modernists argue that people and communities of the world are diverse and should be considered unique. From this vantage point, ecumenicalism may be considered impractical and even dangerous. Multiple cultures, multiple knowledges and ways of knowing, and multiple arts exist. Each must be considered within its own local, particular context. Striving to find a way to unify life (i.e. to create a single set of criteria to judge it) denies the particular, the local, the unique.

Certain monopolistic theoretical traditions underpinning research are viewed as problematic because, in their search for generalizability, they do not privilege the local, the democratic, or the populist. Humans should give space and voice to different ways of knowing the world, especially to the voices and meanings of different people's stories of personal experience.

Post-modernism Critical Point #3. Our language and our Western tradition privileges rational argument and tends to separate the world into "this" and "that" and create dualities. The task of humans should be to dissolve dichotomies and "binary oppositions." Instead of naming things, humans should work to name the silences and absences.

Post-modernists deplore the marginalized "otherness" created by unified theories and central "totalizing"[12] cultures. For example, when a white-Western-male-heterosexual-able-bodied concept is assumed to be at the center

[12]These totalizing cultures are seen as attempts to control, often noted in such comments as "those with the ability to name the problems have the power."

of culture, everything else is defined as "other" than this, or "different to" it. Similarly, if only one meaning is assumed for a word, regardless of the context in which it is used, all other understandings are "other."

Post-modernists encourage a shift from discursive to figurative forms of communication. They stress image over words, suggesting for example that film and media are more important forms of communication in today's society than written, academic discourse or preaching and Bible. The power of story in people's lives might not have changed, but the form in which the story is told has been transformed.

Post-modernism Critical Point #4. Post-modernists view the past not as an ordered historical development, but as a conglomerate of fragments and images that are endlessly reduplicated and resimulated without possibility of discovering an essential order.

The past is crucial to understand the present, but the logical construction of the past is not one of chronology and order. Nevertheless, we humans carry within us the structures and ideas and habits of our heritage. For example, our language, our culture, and our sense of our selves are created from how our pasts create a dialogue and dialectic with our present experiences. Post-modernists suggest that any attempts to create a sense of the past that is fixed and identifiable is faulty in its design. History is a human construction of our pasts, a highly selective textual representation interpreted and arranged in a particular way, from a particular perspective, to reflect particular meanings. Often the perspective is unknowable to the constructor. In this way, fiction and history are closely related.

Social, historical, and existential realities are discursive[13] realities. There is no ultimate object or genuine historicity that can serve as a reference point that holds it all together. All events, objects, people, experiences making up history are contingent accidents, existing only as a story created by a particular teller at a particular time as a way to construct a particular meaning. In other words, truth is relative -- relating to the teller in time.

Post-modernism Critical Point #5. Post-modernism claims that there is no single, unitary self at the center of our worlds.

Humanism, the hegemony that ensnares most of our social meanings, claims that the self is primary. This sense of humanism can be seen in the setting of curriculum goals and standards -- things like self-growth, autonomous evaluation, independent selves, creative thinking, or self-esteem. But post-modernism claims that humans have multiple selves that may be related and similar, but shift according to circumstances. Our sense of self, our experiences, our relationships, and those memories that create a *self* are all created through language. And language has no firm ground to stand upon; it is rooted in contextual, particular moments of time[14].

A discussion of Covey's work through the quill of post-modernism

When these post-modern principles are applied to critique Covey's work, we find that Covey is the antithesis of post-modernism. He presents his philosophy as grounded in an ontologically uniform understanding of reality as objective, immutable, and universally understood. His "metanarrative," as

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[13]By discursive here, we mean that realities pass quickly from one subject, topic, or reality to another. The whole *process* (a poor choice of terms when discussing discursive) is disjointed, without structure.
[14]This is why a post-modern novel seems to jump around and be hard to follow.

the post-modernists would call it, assumes that there are "natural laws" and "correct principles." This metanarrative hinges upon what Covey defines as "natural" and judges to be "correct."

As is typical of the humanist-rationalist position, Covey objectifies Covey and then stands outside Covey and presumes that what Covey believes to be true is more correct than what someone else, with different (non-Covey) views, may believe to be true. His work seems to refuse to acknowledge that there might be different subjective realities, or that these realities are really fundamentally different understandings which people hold of the world. In contrast to post-modernist thinkers, who argue that at best each one of us can hold only a partial and relative understanding of the world, governed by our idiosyncratic perceptions shaped through experience in a particular environment, Covey seems to believe that the whole meaning of the world is knowable to each individual.

Covey allows that there are subjective realities, but notes that these realities are essentially different perspectives (some clearer than others) of what is unarguably the same objective reality. By holding this position, Covey can dismiss views which conflict with his own by stressing that they are either wrong or that they lack the communicative ability to describe what they mean in the same way that Covey explains. The post-modernist critique asks two central questions: (1) How can we assume that people other than ourselves, in other contexts, with very different understandings of what is true, don't have equally valid points of view to ourselves and, consequently, live a very different reality to our own which is only ever partially accessible to us? and

(2) How do we dare assume that our principles defining what is good, true, and useful in life should apply to all others?

Post-modernists would state that Covey's viewpoint, with its "seven correct principles," is itself partial and local (reflecting a self constituted by a very particular set of cultural, linguistic, and experiential conditions). In his insistence on naming certain acts and beliefs as "correct," Covey banishes to the margins of "otherness" all practices that do not conform to his idiosyncratic configuration of the way the world should unfold. This banishment includes, for example, people who thrive in community life such that the self-determined individual addressed by Covey does not even exist. It includes people who attend more to the ebb and flow of energies weaving the contexts of their lives than to their own rigid prescriptions and expectations -- people who respond to influences that encourage them to change directions once, maybe twice, in their lives[15]. And it includes people whose sense of self and way of being unfolds in relationships rather than in pre-determined self-manufactured "principles."

Covey's view certainly cannot be presented as a single point of light from which judgments are assumed to be possible about the actions and values of diverse people. As we mentioned before, it is a grand narrative; and, such grand narratives are, argues the post-modern critic, typically arrogant. No single set of rules can be possible for the world, because people live in context-dependent situations. The webs in which people live in communities, their traditions and stories, and their experiences all produce different priorities.

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[15]We wondered whether the call "Come, I will make you fishers of people." would be answered "I would, but I've already set my long-term goals."

And, these priorities can only be judged within each context. Worthwhile prescriptive rules for action can only emerge from the context in which they are to apply.

In fairness, Covey does not ignore the existence of other ways of thinking and different perspectives. As evidence of Covey's tolerance for different perspectives, he notes that some people just don't go along with the company's new principles. But, how does he treat these differences? Should these people be seen as people of talent, acumen, and intellect? Should there be an attempt to understand why they may be skeptical, opposed to change, or why they might even appear to be hypocritical? No. Covey states that if employees will not "volunteer their hearts and minds" (p. 58) they should be fired. Nothing personal; it's just that, in business, people need to be on the same page if the business is to progress. Covey notes the need for "a business/mission statement that everyone buys into" (p. 142). These statements seem to expose inherent contradictions between Covey's underlying philosophy and statements that Covey makes that we should love everyone and trust them to be reasonable and good.

Post-modernists would also critique Covey's one-size-fits-all, canned program. Covey's idea that there are "lighthouse principles governing all societies" (p. 33) also must be criticized. Covey's idea that there are universal laws (like fairness, integrity, honesty, humor, dignity, service, and quality) also would be disputed. On the face of it (Covey's work), the Christian reader must ask the question: So, what's wrong with this? The possible problem is that Covey's sense of self is so strong[16] that it becomes problematic when the

[16]As in the Ronald Reagan (recently Republican) ideologue's sense of self.

self is detached from Christ, from surrender to God, from accepting God's grace and forgiveness, from gratitude for God's love and work and power. Despite what Covey says about God's central position, our honest attempts at reading and making sense of Cóvey's work suggests the possibility that self-dependence, in Covey's eyes, means that there is no recognition of power greater than yourself.

A final critique the post-modernists would apply to Covey is to critique the possibility of him gaining his goal. This goal, or main project, is to maintain stability and coherence in a world which is actually fragmented and alienating. Post-moderists would call this goal ignorant, in the sense that Covey doesn't acknowledge (he ignores) the very real pressures and conditions that apply themselves to human lives. As a result of his active ignorance (not stupidity), Covey's plan is doomed to failure.

Questions we might pose to ourselves emerging from the post-modernist critique

1. How do we accept into ourselves the views and values of other people? Do we honor these beliefs, attending to the context in which they dwell?
2. How do we reconcile our claim to a unitary belief system and a stable understanding of reality in a fragmented post-modern world of multiple realities?
3. How do we justify the imposition of our understanding of "correct principles".for living and believing on others?

Critical Challenges to Covey from a Feminist Perspective

Our feminist critique is one that includes elements of both structuralist feminist critique and dimensions of feminist pedagogy. However, for the purposes of tnis paper, we will not spend a great deal of time outlining the complexities of these positions. First, we do not claim to have expert insights into them. Second, the task is beyond the scope of this paper. We have, instead, skimmed the surface to pull together a conglomerate of ideas that we roughly have named "feminist."[17] We hope that, despite our lack of precision, this conglomerate position encourages insight.

Assertions of feminism

The feminist critique rests on a number of important considerations. We have selected six. First, feminists understand the power of language, noting that men have since time memorial been able to "name the world." This phrase "naming the world" means to have control over the language and, thus, the ability to gain and keep the power. Second, a feminist pedagogy stance perceives that interdependent learning and emergent design is the way humans naturally live their lives. As a result, the human task is to live in harmony with each other. At least the feminist position is that humans live better in harmony than in disharmony. A third insight from a feminist critique is that responsibility should be defined differently than it traditionally has been defined. Women have noted their sense of responsibility for others;

[17]Our views are culled from Donovan (1985), Descarriers-Belanger and Roy (1992), Tisdell (1993), Hart (1992), and Burstow (1994), and Luke and Gore (1992).

men have noted their responsibility for their own actions[18]. Fourth, a feminist critique often focuses on changing, rather than accepting, systems -- recognizing that in many ways systems of human organization themselves limit choices and abilities for success. Fifth, feminist ideas of success often differ from other, non-feminist measures of success. Instead of the socio-economic attitude of pushing one's way to the top, feminist measures of success are most often measured by the strength of relationships. Six, feminists note that there is a split between the public and the private sphere and that women's subjective personal experiences need to be validated as a legitimate source of knowledge.

A discussion of Covey through the quill of feminist critique

As an example of how Covey discounts the feminist perspective, Covey tells a story (p. 186) about a man who talks to him about his wife's "harassing" him by checking up on his actions during business trips. Covey's response is to admonish the man for seeking short-term solutions and tells him that "you can't talk yourself out of a problem that you acted your way into." There's no question; Covey has a point. Based on their past experience (the man met his present wife at a conference when he was away from his first wife), the second wife may have good reason to be suspicious of her husband. However, what Covey and the man fail to address is the fact that the woman may have a whole set of her own experiences that influence how she might see and act

[18]In this way, women seem more in tune with oriental ways of seeing the world as a unified system instead of little pieces. For example, the Japanese have a notion of *mokato* which contrasts with Western notions of intentional action. In the West, human action most often focuses on the intent of the actor. The central question would concern "Did the person mean to act correctly?" The concept of mokato, in addition to intent, focuses on the impact of an action. The intention of the actor remains important; however, the impact of the action must also be considered. Women, it seems, are more considerate of how their actions impact others than men are.

upon the events of her life (e. g. she may be interested in the business -- it is true that she used to be in the business -- and might not be concerned with the husband's actions at all). By failing to address the possibility that the woman has her own subjective experience, the wife's actions are labeled as a "problem" for the man. Covey and the man agree on the reason without actually asking the man's wife. Covey may, in fact, have greater insight than the man, but their basic belief is the same. The woman's actions are a problem that must be solved; they are not a set of experiences and insights to be considered and understood.

Another example that suggests that Covey does not recognize the importance of subjective ideas of others is that Sandra's (his wife's) experiences and insights are virtually ignored in the book; or, if they are noted they are recognized (and appreciated) as helpful and secondary to his own actions and experience. Given Covey's other inclinations, we believe that his wife's secondary place in the book is more here than the fact that he is writing the book and she isn't. He could have, we believe, recognized her actions in more important ways[19].

Feminist critique would also attack Covey's use of exclusive language. Given current, acceptable standards of writing, Covey's exclusivity is shocking. At present, feminist consciousness is at a high point. There is considerable literature on male hegemony and much concern about exclusive pronouns

[19]The following paragraphs illustrate the approach to human relationships advocated by Covey. Although he portrays himself as role model for the reader's own behavior and attempts, we believe, to be empathic in this case, we believe that the empathic stance is merely a technique, calculated for purposes of controlling another's behavior in a relationship of contest. He tends to work from the stance that, if control is not seized, one risks victimization by the other. The "other," in this case a hypothetical wife, has been objectified and labelled rather than opened to in a reciprocal honoring of perspective and experience. The prescription is about taking responsibility for "correcting" another's behavior, precluding the possibility of mutual growth through intersubjective inquiry and caring

and other gender-biased language. Yet, in the face of this feminist consciousness, Covey's use of exclusive language is, at best, inconsiderate and, at worst, pretentious and cavalier.

Feminist critique would contest Covey's presumption that all individuals have freedom. Covey defines freedom from the viewpoint that humans are isolated and detached. By doing so, he side-steps the feminist understanding that people are intricately connected as beings-in-relation to one another and that these sets of relations are held together by power dynamics, power differentials, personal limitations, structural oppressions, etc. Covey ignores the ideal of power altogether, except to note the idea of personal power, which he believes all people can have. In many ways, his critique fits into dominant American cultural mythology that all people can succeed within the American dream, a dream characterized by its "push your way to the top" mentality. Covey also ignores, feminists might suggest in this naive assumption that there exists an equal enjoyment of freedom, that there is a social construction of self and of meaning and that in our North American society some people are more equal than others. Feminists would note that this false consciousness works to internalize oppression (see for instance Hart, 1992).

Feminist critique would attack Covey's presumption that individuals can and should each assume responsibility for their own actions and situations. This view also derives from the "self-made-man" and "American dream" ideology. Instead, feminist critique would highlight the need for collective responsibility and the need for humans to organize themselves into community.

Within this same line of thinking, feminist critique would point to the honesty and accuracy of Covey's espousing a bootstrap mentality which suggests that all humans are response-able (able to respond)[20]. Implicit in Covey's bootstrap message is the belief that hard work produces success, a belief that emphasizes personal power to change oneself and one's circumstances. Covey maintains, through his emphasis on every person's ability to choose to be "response-able," that every choice is possible. To follow this line of reasoning logically, a person's lack of success is a result of laziness or personal failure[21]. In Covey's view, the system is not the problem. Nor does Covey suggest that systemic change is possible or even desirable. Instead, Covey's response is that individuals work within their "circles of influence," which gradually expand as these individuals advance their ability to make choices to exercise personal power in appropriate ways. Covey does not acknowledge that constraints of race, class, natural ability, genetic and acquired challenges of various sorts, or gender might be important determinants.

Covey works from the frame that it is possible for all people to be free to choose (p. 73) and to be response-able for their own lives. In working from this frame, feminists would contend that Covey ignores the structural problems people must struggle against. He presumes that all people are "free"

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[20]See for example Briskin, 1990.

[21]This message is not out of line with evangelical Christian ways of seeing life. To cite a particular, personal example, Parsons was hired to write a book based on research findings for a study of young adolescents and their parents and to suggest ways that churches could "use" the findings of this study to structure and create church programs. One finding, that church people were having financial problems, was interpreted by educational leaders within the church as proof that parishioners needed courses on financial planning -- suggesting that their lack of money was because they couldn't organize or keep track of their economic lives. When Parsons suggested that another explanation for financial difficulties could be unemployment or outside circumstances over which people had little control, this explanation was rejected and Parsons was "ordered" to write that churches needed programs in financial planning.

and able to "see" the issues and the obstacles to their goals. By doing so, he denies the goals that enlightenment movements work for. Feminists would contend that Covey provides no help for humans to work through pain and fear; and, in fact, the only example of disability he offers in his book is one of a disabled hero, who is able to transcend suffering (p. 73).

Feminists would also tend to critique Covey's reliance on the importance of individualism. Covey explicitly shows how people work on their own to promote collectivity. He suggests that interdependence is a choice only independent people can make (p. 186); but, he does not seem to note that dependence might have a place in relationships. For example, a Christian reader might argue that Covey does not note that people should or could form a dependence on God. Covey seems to ignore the idea that humans can arrive at strength through community, or that self-mastery and self-discipline might form the foundations of relationships with others instead of just building up the individual[22] (p. 186).

Within the book The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, women's roles are almost totally ignored. For example, Covey gives examples of the family working or living together; but, his wife seems totally absent from powerful roles in decision-making. Contrary to the understood roles of women, Covey seems to have no understanding of relationship as building morality or the power of relationship as constructing knowledge (see for example Gilligan, 1982)

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[22]In some ways, we are reminded of the old Hans and Franz sketch on Saturday Night Live..."We are here to PUMP YOU UP!"

Covey's work is goal-based, building phrases like "begin with the end in mind." This goal-based structure notes that people work to pre-determine their lives. Strict adherence to the obtaining of goals, feminist critique might argue, ignores an openness to renewal or the sense of a continual flexibility. To us, Covey comes across as a man controlling his world. Even though there is "God talk" throughout the book, within Covey's stance there is no recognition that God could have any bearing on human life or no recognition of the value of active listening to God as the controller of human life. Instead, there is a focus on the making of maps about how things are and how things should be (p. 24)[23].

Finally, feminist critique would probably point to Covey's hierarchical lock-step system. This focus on following directions and adherence to order not only hints of where the power (as in following orders) stems from, but is in itself a male way of addressing the world. Feminist critique would probably ask: Does Covey not recognize recursiveness of life situations?

Questions we might pose to ourselves emerging from the feminist critique

1. What is our view of other people? Do we believe that humans are responsible for their own dilemmas and circumstances? Do we believe that and act as if people have created what's happened to them, including abuse, disability, loss, addiction, disorders, poverty, oppression, depression? Do we

[23]There is also other talk about how humans should take control of their lives. Humans should have a conscious design, plan, or set of goals (p. 49). They should work from a vision and an inner compass (p. 101), although there is no sense where that inner compass comes from except Covey's continual focus on self-reliance and self-mastery. There is no Christian sense of letting go of the control of one's life in surrender to God. As Christian readers, we wondered if this was an arrogant stance and asked ourselves: There is God-talk, but where is God's power?

believe that and act as if those who suffer from these situations should assume responsibility for them?

2. Is it possible that we view some of these individuals through eyes of disrespect, disdain, arrogance, or scorn?

3. As Christians acting within the world, do we act in ways that would add difficulties to the already burdened lives of other people; or, do we actively show love?

Critical Challenges to Covey from a Perspective of Critical Pedagogy

The task of critical pedagogy is to problematize the current state of knowledge production and reproduction in schools and explore new pedagogical possibilities. Because Covey presents himself as an itinerant or pseudo-teacher (instructing his audience to read like "students") and his system is certainly a curriculum of content and method, his work deserves to be evaluated as a curriculum and his actions within that curriculum as a form of pedagogy. The questions critical theorists ask include questions about how knowledge misrepresents the world, how it distorts, and how it socializes people to think in particular ways.

Like other theoretical spheres, there is considerable diversity among the voices such as Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Michael Collins, and others promoting critical pedagogy. However, because we cannot cover the breadth of the area of critical pedagogy, we have selected one person's work (that of Peter McClaren, 1989, which describes itself as an introduction to

critical pedagogy) to provide a specific theoretical reference point from which to focus this critical stance[24].

Assertions of critical pedagogy

McClaren analyses educational efforts ("schooling") from the assumption that men and women are essentially bound to inhabit a world rife with contradictions and teeming with asymmetries of power and practice. Like other critical theorists, he asserts that knowledge is socially produced and believes that humans participate in different ways towards this social production.

Like other critical theorists, McClaren believes that change is difficult. To address the question of how things could be otherwise how life could change, humans must interrogate their competing claims for truth and examine the ways their experiences have produced these understandings. McClaren indicates that the human dilemma is to exist and struggle in a state of domination where power plays are enacted as a means of seeking control. The domination of people, which is the central human struggle, is expressed through consensual social practices, forms, and structures produced throughout the society -- within the family, the school, the church, and business. The seductiveness of human oppression is that humans do not know they are oppressed. And, because they have never been able to understand the limits and causes of their own oppression, the oppressed unknowingly consent and participate in their own oppression. Those in

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[24]Once again, we have sacrificed thoroughness for efficiency.

dominant social or economic positions gain their power by constructing a representation of society and by building the structures of the systems in ways which mask power relations and distort status. In other words, the people with the real power are the ones who can create the fabrications in which others think they must live.

Like other critical theorists, McClaren notes that we humans not only are often ignorant of these fabrications of reality, but also often fail to see that our subjectivities have been constructed out of the social practice around us and embedded within us. We might loudly proclaim our freedom to choose, as if saying so makes it so. But, saying so does not make it so. As humans constructed in a social world, critical theorists suggest, we tend not to critically question the way our knowledge, constituted according to a particular grid of social conditions, foregrounds a relatively narrow range of possible choices to our vision. We simply take for granted our assumptions about "the way things are." Other alternatives for action, and other possibilities of thinking and being, are "absent" and ignored.

Crucial questions that critical pedagogy might specifically ask about Covey include: Does Covey teach a set of practices that nicely socialize people to accept the world around them? Or, does he empower us to act in ways that interrupt hegemony and effectively change the circumstances that shape us?

A discussion of Covey from the quill of critical pedagogy

Covey certainly presents an agenda for personal change as a route to social change. By working to expand our "circle of influence" (those circumstances

over which we can exert some control through action), we can gradually have impact on those issues outside us which form our "circles of concern" (p. 81-85). Consequently his book positions itself as promoting empowerment, not passive acceptance of and submission to existing states of affairs. But Covey does not attend to the ideologies which continue to sustain societal structures and that force our compliance to these same structures. In fact, a case could be made that Covey's system serves to reproduce the dominant ideologies, with his focus on changing the individual to accommodate the needs of business and industry and with his acceptance of the legitimate power of these institutions to determine how people should view the world. In fact, he presents his own system as itself a dominant ideology, not amenable to critical questioning.

By advocating the individual's control, suggesting that humans need to accept all the responsibility for their own problems, Covey renders invisible the oppressions that externally coerce or internally strangle an individual's power to act. Covey simply claims that "if our lives are a function of conditioning and conditions it is because we have chosen to empower those things to control us" (p. 71). But, the question remains: Can individuals simply choose to be free of the external and internal structures and constraints controlling their beliefs and behaviors?

Covey presents people, through examples, as problem makers. At the same time he presents himself, through his reactions to other people's problems, as the wise problem-solver. Even when he tells a story showing his own mistakes, the story's ultimate message is how wise and open Covey is because he is able to learn from these mistakes. Covey's reactions to people suggest

that he blames them for their own situations -- the situation itself is seen as neutral. For example, employees are seen as selfish and lazy (p. 205 and p. 58). Children are viewed as loud and noisy (p. 30), who need to be taught to share (p. 38) and managed (the example of his son and the lawn and his daughter, p. 57), who are unhappy and empty (p. 43), and who work from a scarcity mentality (p. 219). Yet, Covey notes that most people listen with intent to reply (p. 239). In short, to the critical theorist, Covey promotes a simplistic system that obscures the complexities underneath. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Covey has no notion of politics in dialogue or of the structures that prevent freedom; and, because he does not, critical pedagogy would see his view of the world as ignorant, shallow, uninformed, and short-sighted.

Critical pedagogy believes that all relationships are driven by power dynamics. All instruction, including self-improvement systems, are political. Covey sidesteps the inherent political nature of his own principles, which themselves recommend action based on understandings of an a-political world. Democratic dialogue which is open and honest and can render meaning transparent is recommended as achievable, a claim which ignores the complexities posed in dialogue by power structures (see Ellsworth, 1988).

Questions we might pose to ourselves emerging from the critique of critical pedagogy

1. Do we, as Christians, teach a set of practices that nicely socialize people to accept the world around them as it is? Or, do we work to empower people to

act in ways that interrupt the hegemony and effectively change the circumstances that shape them?

2. Should we, as Christians, encourage people we meet to accept the world as it is or work to change it?

Critical Challenges to Covey from an Non-Functionalist Perspective

A hermeneutical analysis of Covey's presentation of seven habits of effective living reveals a functionalist world view which emphasizes instrumental, technical purposes. Covey constructs a world of problems that can be solved. Principles are established a priori according to the individual's beliefs, then applied to solve these problems. The point of learning about people and situations is to help fix both of them.

In contrast, a non-functionalist view emphasizes understanding how people make meaning of their experiences and how we shape "intersubjective" meanings with others in our environments. The non-functionalist view we are outlining doesn't presume to fix these problems; it tries to understand them more deeply. We are adopting this non-functionalist perspective to illuminate the instrumental world of problems posed by Covey. A hermeneutical approach helps point out some gaps and silences in Covey's system and, in doing so, may help uncover considerations to apply in our own soul-searching as Christians.

Most thoughtful writers about life believe that humans are destined to live in the realm of paradox. That is, many human experiences simply cannot be understood, and we can't understand them. The only action, in response to

paradox, is to live faithfully within the paradox itself. But Covey's system does not recognize the existence of paradox. In denying that there is a paradox and in defining what humans know and "face," he encourages readers to believe that the contradictions they live within are temporary states that must be gotten over. When this perception captures people's minds there is no chance that they will learn to live within the mystery and the opportunity of these things they cannot understand. Furthermore, if people cannot get over things they cannot control, they may enter into the false world of self-blame, self-effacement, and self-abuse. In some ways, Covey's ultra clarity and problem-solving focus denies humans the opportunity to live in faith and hope.

A discussion of Covey from the quill of the non-functionalist perspective

Non-functionalist critical point #1: Covey supports a problem-solving mentality.

Covey observes that human living is a series of problems which can and should be solved. This stance, a common one in an instrumental world view which focuses on technical production in a material reality, invites skepticism from two vantage points. First, the problem-solving stance seeks an ultimate order where difficulties finally cease, peace is finally obtained, and struggle finally comes to rest. Reality is assumed to be stable and ordered; and, problems are viewed as temporary and unwelcome disruptions to this ideal of harmony.

But, there is another way to look at problems. It is possible to value problems as opportunities to grow and learn. When seen as an opportunity for growth, problems can be valued as inherently ambiguous and difficult, to be embraced and accepted as such. Covey keys his book on seeking solutions. In doing so, he promotes the idea that there must be a solution for everything and implicitly suggests that the ultimate goal of life is to stamp out, to foreclose, all problems. Throughout the book, Covey narrates anecdotes presenting family, friends, and acquaintances bringing their frustrations or disappointments to him. And in warm, fatherly tones, he shows them what their "problem" is and how to solve it, offering his own sage advice as the ultimate problem-solver.

Second, there is inherent difficulty in accepting without challenge exactly which parts of the flow of energy and events comprising everyday living are named as problems. Foucault (1972) draws our attention to the power dynamic implicit in the act of naming something as "aberrant" or problematic, an act based on normalizing a particular set of conditions or practices then deciding what is acceptable and what isn't within this set. Most of us recognize that successful consultants and advertisers are very good at manipulating this principle by creating consumer need: they diagnose a particular situation as a "problem" requiring a remedy, which of course they are more than willing to sell to us. Even so-called perennial social problems are perceived as perennial social problems because we have chosen to configure reality in particular ways, according to our desires and expectations. A sunset, for example, could be construed as a problem by anyone looking for a sunrise. Questions posed from this perspective ask: How did this "problem" emerge or come to be seen as a problem? What makes its emergence possible?

What is the constitutive grid of conditions, assumptions, and forces that makes the emergence of a social problem possible? How does this particular problem gain social "scrutiny" while others don't?

Non-functionalist critical point #2: Covey supports a diagnosis--prescription position.

When life is reduced to a series of problems, the task of living becomes one of systematically finding and understanding the "problems" that plague us, then seeking appropriate solutions to make the problem go away. Covey uses the medical metaphor of "diagnosis" to underline the significance of this task of problem-finding, rendering all struggles or challenges as illnesses to be diagnosed. He continues the metaphor by emphasizing the importance of diagnosing before prescribing (p. 243). As a result, life's mysteries are forced into a linear rational pipeline of problem definition -- solution planning -- and implementation.

David Jardine (1994), a hermeneutical researcher and educator, shows how this "technical-scientific discourse" which pervades much current thinking about learning forecloses questions and, ultimately, meaning. The discourse is seductive in its promise of the control and the finality that we all desire so profoundly: "the relentless human lust to render the world a harmless picture" (p. 118). This desire for prediction and control underpins the traditional functionalistic perspective, which Covey's problem-solving stance tends to emulate. The obsessive need to control has been criticized for many years by social science researchers and theorists in education, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, political science, business, management studies,

and other disciplines as ignoring the recursive, messy, emergent nature of how we come to make meaning from our experience and how we find a way of being in relation to experience. Action to influence a particular outcome is only one choice; for some, a better choice might be to wait or watch - or not to choose at all.

Non-functionalist critical point #3: Covey supports a belief in the absence of suffering.

Covey does not tend to acknowledge that life contains ambiguity, suffering, and difficulty, much of which must simply be accepted and lived through with grace, dignity, and learning. Jardine (1994) argues that the difficulty or essential pain of life's mystery and ambiguity must not only be accepted but honored as the core of generativity: "The returning of life to its original difficulty is a returning of the possibility of the living Word" (p. 119). Covey views positive energy as good, but tends to see other energies as "not good." Covey is, more or less, silent on ideas like pain, sorrow, suffering. But, there are, in this world, people who suffer without being at fault. Both the Bible and our experience suggests that this is the case[25]. The Christian good news is that suffering shows the way through the cross to compassion.

[25]For us, as Christian readers, we would wonder what Covey would do with Job. Honestly, we do not wonder. Our reading of Covey's book suggests that he might be among Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) who tend to blame the victim.

Non-functionalist critical point #4: Covey supports a means-ends productivity model.

Covey shows that performance and productivity -- those things that are measurable -- are what counts. His P/PC principle (Production/ Production Capability, p. 54) suggests that meditation, stillness, internal work, and non-active ways of living are not to be valued as much as doing. Doing, not being, is emphasized. Visible product and activity are the measures of success. Covey praises "socially impressive accomplishments" (p. 20) and highlights assets that are physical, financial, and human. But, the question remains: What about other kinds of assets -- things like patience, tolerance, service?

This reductionism of life and its meaning to mercantile concepts is evident also in Covey's depiction of relationships in capitalistic terms. We build "Emotional Bank Accounts" with one another (p. 188), and the "key deposit" in this bank account is "empathic listening" (p. 241). Covey notes that a "withdrawal" is a hurt or wrong done to someone we love.

Questions we might pose to ourselves emerging from this non-functionalist critique

1. As Christians, how do we decide what a "problem" is or what comes to emerge and be seen as a problem? Do we act in ways that make some problems, maybe minor ones, emerge and some major problems remain hidden?
2. As Christians, are we award of the constitutive grid of conditions, assumptions, and forces that makes the emergence of a social problem

possible? Do we ignore particular problems; do we scrutinize some problems more rigorously than others because we are blind to some? Is there a self-serving reason for our blindness?

Critical Challenges to Covey from a Perspective of "Exclusionary Representation"

Finally, Covey's unitary system and anecdotal examples can be critiqued on the basis of the high degree of selectivity employed to represent humanity. In the multi-layered, multi-textured fabric of Canadian society, the general principles of "tolerance and understanding" have been enshrined in policies affecting education, employment, resource distribution, and many other dimensions of everyday life. These principles typically target any biased representations of human beings which present groups in stereotypical ways or implying that one group has primacy over others. Implicitly, bias works to render some groups as "others," and therefore less significant, less capable of power, or less worthy of equal consideration. Dimensions of possible bias include representations of family, socio-economic class, race-ethnicity, religion, age, gender, ability, and sexual orientation[26].

This stance of exclusionary representation is promoted by certain feminist thought as well as critical theorists and some post-modernist thinkers. In addition, many socially active groups ranging from ecologists to First Nations activists also ground their opinions on a critique of exclusionary

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[26]We have chosen to call critiques which focus on pointing out such bias, through negative portrayals or omission, critiques of "exclusionary representation."

representation of dominance by particular groups of the societal mainstream. Because these critiques represent a mixed bag of thoughts a voices, yet with a thread of unity, we have presented this critique of "exclusionary representation" by itself, rather than situating it within other paradigms. The goal of these sorts of critiques is to eliminate the exclusionary practices that tend to depict reality in highly limited ways and ignore the rich diversity of individuals situated in particular, local circumstances.

Regarding race-ethnicity, Covey's stories illustrating his "correct principles" of living feature almost exclusively Euro-American individuals. No attempt to recognize race-ethnicity diversity is made, although a few outstanding non-Euro-American individuals such as Gandhi and Sadat are celebrated as champions of Covey's principles. No specific references to Canada occur, although a plethora of American references appear. Many of these illustrations involve various presidents and managers of USA corporations.

Covey's liberal use of sweeping and unsubstantiated generalizations often leans to unfortunate stereotypes, along the lines of the following: "Most families are managed on the basis of crises ... and instant gratification - not on sound principles" (p. 138). Seniors are often simplistically presented as valuable mainly for the role as grandparents, or else outrageously stereotyped. For example, the "old woman" depicted in a popular figure-ground illustration is described by Covey as "in her 60s or 70s ... you'd probably help her across the street" p. 24. Disability does not appear, excepting one unthinkably callous reference to mental illness: "Many so-called mental and emotional illnesses are really symptoms of an underlying sense of

meaninglessness." p. 108. Such a vision of mental illness supports those ancient mythologies that the mentally ill are ill because they choose to be so.

These brief examples are intended to provide a flavor of the limited and sometimes very exclusive representations contained in Covey's book. Any of these dimensions could be elaborated. However, for purposes of manageability, we have chosen to discuss in detail just one dimension, Covey's portrayal of family, from the perspective of exclusionary representation.

The problematic of idealizing traditional family

Covey honors family solidarity, a view which we are not suggesting should be viewed as problematic. However, in doing so, he honors traditional family structures to the exclusion of other more familial relationships. He explicitly promotes the idea of a strong "intergenerational family" (p. 315), claiming that family is a "powerful force" when uncles, cousins and aunts all dwell closely. Yet, close dwelling is sometimes an impossibility as many North American families survive on the edge of economic pressures that force mobility. Single-parent, blended, or other non-traditional families simply don't exist among the idealized two-parent, middle-class family exemplars that dominate Covey's book. Consequently, readers who dwell in non-traditional families, or cultural communities built on different principles than the Western ideal of the two-parent nuclear family, are inherently cast to the outside, the margins, of Covey's system. Important questions must be asked: How shall families in diverse communities and circumstances construct meaning and apply it from the unitary and exclusionary family

portrayals, and advice emanating from these provided liberally throughout the book? How shall any family struggling with various dysfunctions and disadvantages (many of them produced, say some sociologists, by the same traditional structures promoted by Covey) make positive sense of their own situation when presented with nothing but an impossible ideal?

Interestingly, Covey also presents businesses as requiring the same sorts of relationships, principles, goal orientations, and missions as a family. His stories honor employees who are committed to serve the family of their organization, and managers and presidents who discover the "correct" principle of building community in their organizations.

Many of Covey's stories focus on parenting, emphasizing unconditional love. Throughout the book, Covey portrays himself as a role model of a continuously caring, nurturing, understanding parent. Several stories show how Covey himself assumes a very powerful, authoritarian role family head. Some would describe him as "controlling." With his children, Covey typically finds problems in their behavior and trains them to act according to his belief system (see pages 20, 38, 133, 175). Covey's wife is conspicuous by her absence in any real influential way as an active mother in the family examples. She receives mention here and there as Covey's helper (p. 20), and he admits that he "came to value her insight" (p. 312) in talking over his family decisions with her. The few stories featuring Sandra present her as dependent on Covey and somewhat incapable (see p.319 for a denigrating portrayal of her lack of common sense, and the story of her deep-seated obsession with Frigidaires, which Covey helped her diagnose as an expression of loyalty to her father).

Using a technique common in self-help books, Covey is gracious enough to reveal some personal foibles, telling a few stories of his own fathering mistakes that show his openness to learning from others, while teaching us, the reader-students, important new wisdoms. The readers, like Covey's children, are placed in a subordinate position as Covey's students. The reader's task, and Covey is more than implicit in this task, is to listen and learn. Any corporation which grants membership to its culture through baptism in Covey-study forces its employees to adopt a similar subordinate, disarmed and uncritical stance. The potential power accruing in such a corporation demands scrutiny.

In summary, Covey's overall presentation of the "right" family is highly patriarchal, fostering exactly the sorts of authoritarian, hierarchical decision-making structures, asymmetrical power relations in families and businesses, and dependency relations reinforcing the sorts of passivity that many social critiques have been struggling to eliminate.

Questions we might pose to ourselves emerging from this critique

1. As Christians, do we help families in diverse communities and circumstances construct meaning for their lives? Or, do we apply a unitary and exclusionary "family" portrayals as Christians -- a club that not all can join?
2. How can we, as Christians, help any family struggling with various dysfunctions and disadvantages? Do we, in fact, help produce the same traditional structures that bring pain to many instead of healing?

3. How can we help others make positive sense of their own situation? Or, do we present others with little but impossible ideals?

Conclusion

When we began our paper, we hoped to use the popular work of Steven Covey as a focus to set up a critical framework that might adjudicate pop best-sellers that used spirituality, and the increasing appetite for this appeal among mainstream North Americans, to generate questions to help readers see what is useful and what is harmful about these various books. Then, we hoped to apply these same critiques on ourselves so that we might better understand how to more fruitfully work as Christians within the secular environment of the university. We talked explicitly about whether we should revert to appealing to Christianity as a final source for the critique -- as the ultimate perspective presenting the critique. Without finalizing our goals, we set out to work.

Our purpose in this paper became (1) to review the work of the popular writer Steven Covey because we believe that his work is having a large influence on both Christians and on non-Christians, (2) to subject Covey's work to current critical metaphors we experience at our work at the university setting and see what emerged, and (3) to seek the possibility of using the knowledge that emerges from our rigorous critique as a way to adjudicate our own work as Christians within the secular context of the university.

In our review of Covey's work, we have noted his tendencies and many of the potential problems with his views. We have also used the critiques to

derive a number of questions that we feel we must ask ourselves. These questions follow:

1. As Christians, how do we define a human's purpose on earth, in a community of humanity? What meaning does life have in our practical actions? How best can we fulfill God's purpose within our own work? What should we do to live well the life God has intended for us?
2. As Christians, how do we accept the views and values of other people? Do we honor their beliefs, and consider the context in which they dwell?
3. As Christians, how do we reconcile our claim to a unitary belief system and a stable understanding of reality in a fragmented post-modern world of multiple realities?
4. As Christians, how do we justify the imposition of our understanding of "correct principles" for living and believing on others?
5. What is our view of other people? Do we believe that humans are responsible for their own dilemmas and circumstances? Do we believe that and act as if people have created what's happened to them, including abuse, disability, loss, addiction, disorders, poverty, oppression, depression? Do we believe that and act as if those who suffer from these situations should assume responsibility for them?
6. Is it possible that we view individuals through eyes of disrespect, disdain, arrogance, or scorn?
7. As Christians acting within the world, do we act in ways that would add difficulties to the already burdened lives of other people; or, do we actively show love? How might we best show love?
8. Do we, as Christians, teach a set of practices that nicely socialize people to accept the world around them as it is? Or, do we work to empower people to

act in ways that interrupt the hegemony and effectively change the circumstances that shape them?

9. Should we, as Christians, encourage people we meet to accept the world as it is or work to change it?

10. As Christians, how do we decide what a "problem" is or what comes to emerge and be seen as a problem? Do we act in ways that make some problems, maybe minor ones, emerge and some major problems remain hidden?

11. As Christians, are we aware of the conditions, assumptions, and forces that makes the emergence of a social problem possible? Do we ignore particular problems; do we scrutinize some problems more rigorously than others because we are blind to some? Is there a self-serving reason for our blindness?

12 As Christians, do we help families in diverse communities and circumstances construct meaning for their lives? Or, do we apply a unitary and exclusionary "family" portrayals as Christians -- a club that not all can join?

13. How can we, as Christians, help families struggling with dysfunctions and disadvantages? Do we, in fact, help produce the same traditional structures that bring pain to many instead of healing?

14. How can we help others make positive sense of their own situation? Or, do we present others with little but impossible ideals?

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